

Queer Café: A 2SLGBTQIA+ Program in an Integrated Virtual Health Care Service.

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Introduction

In Canada, youth of gender and/or sexual minorities are at a greater risk of mental illness, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide (1). The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately exacerbated mental health issues among 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (2). Furthermore, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth face more barriers than their peers when accessing mental health services during the pandemic (2).

Foundry is an integrated youth services (IYS) organization for youth ages 12-24 in British Columbia, Canada, with Foundry Virtual providing online support. Youth Peer Support Workers (YPSWs) within Foundry Virtual identified a need for a program dedicated to 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. This sparked the idea of the Queer Café program.

Objectives

The objectives of the Queer Café program are to 1) create a safer space for youth across the province to get support and 2) evaluate the impact of the program.

Approach/Methods

YPSWs who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+ launched Queer Café as a regular social group through Zoom. The groups were designed to allow youth to socialize with peers (e.g., Drag Night), learn about community resources (e.g., Gender-Affirming Care Q&A with Trans Care B.C.), and build mental health resiliency (e.g., Conflict Resolution Workshop). The integration of the program within Foundry Virtual allows for a seamless transition between Queer Café and other services. The impact of the program was measured through verbal feedback and two anonymous surveys.

Results

Queer Café has been running cohorts since 2020. We have had 252 participants from ages 12–24 since launching the group, including both new and returning youth. Analysis of survey results is ongoing. Based on observations and discussion, YPSWs theorize that Queer Café is reaching a significant number of youth living with mental health challenges, neurodivergent youth, youth in rural communities, and youth facing social isolation.

Quotes from participants, collected in feedback surveys:

“It’s nice to be around other queer people; even if we aren’t always talking about queer things, it’s nice to be in a safe and fun environment with other people who are similar to you.”

“Thank you for being supportive, welcoming, understanding, and making this feel like a safe place to be myself”

Conclusion

The success of the Queer Café program provides hope and direction for future mental health and wellness programs for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Youth felt comfortable using additional services in the IYS model after attending Queer Café, suggesting this initiative could be valuable to similar IYS programs in Canada and beyond.

